

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

“And They Took Offense at Him”

Mark 6:1-3

Most of us like to think of Jesus as a kind and loving person, eager to help those who need help and caring for those who need care. Most of us like to think of Jesus as the Good Shepherd who rescues little lambs. Most of us like to think of him as meek and mild, loving and caring – the kind of person, as it’s said, you’d like to take home and introduce to your mother.

Well, you know, there was a day when Jesus did go home and he didn’t receive a very cordial welcome. News of his teaching and of his healings had spread throughout the region and one might have expected that he would have received a hero’s welcome upon his return. But there was no celebration for Jesus that day, no tickertape parade. The Bible tells us that those in his hometown of Nazareth were offended by his very presence.

Offended? Offended by this kind and loving person? Offended by one who is eager to help and care? Offended by a good shepherd? Our Gospel lesson for today suggests that the people of Nazareth were offended because they had trouble reconciling the wise words and the marvelous works of this Jesus with who they thought he was. After all, he was just a carpenter. He wasn’t an ordained rabbi or a professor of theology. He was only a carpenter, a son and a brother, a nobody. Certainly God wouldn’t work through a nobody like Jesus, certainly God would find a better way.

But before we condemn the people of Nazareth out of hand, we need to acknowledge that many have that same thought today. Robert Capon once said that “the true paradigm of the ordinary view of Jesus in our day is ‘Superman.’ Offended at the humanity of Jesus, people try to jazz it up. They try to transform the carpenter into Superman who relentlessly battled for truth, justice, and, of course, the American way. This Superman, this Jesus,” Capon continues, “may look like a man but he’s really not. But don’t laugh”, he says, “the human race is, was, and probably always will be deeply unwilling to accept a human messiah. We don’t want to be saved in our humanity, we want to be saved from it. We crucify Jesus, not because he was and is God, but because he failed to come up to our expectations about how God should act. It’s not that we weren’t or even aren’t looking for a messiah; it’s just that Jesus wasn’t and isn’t what most people are looking for. Our kind of Messiah would come down from a cross not die on one. He wouldn’t do a stupid thing like rising from the dead. He would do the smart thing and never die in the first place.” Capon is right.

The offense of Jesus persists even to this day. And that attitude toward him impedes the work he seeks to do among them. Mark reports that Jesus could do no mighty work in Nazareth, except that he healed a few sick people. The fact is that people’s attitude

toward Jesus either helps or hinders his work among them, at least when it comes to this sort of thing. God's not in the habit of holding a gun to anyone's head.

The importance of one's attitude toward Jesus, as well as one's relationship with him, is highlighted in Mark's gospel by the way in which Jesus is depicted as having power and authority over nature but not over people. Jesus heals diseases, casts out demons, controls the winds, but he doesn't control people nor dictate their response to him. And since that is so, people's attitude toward him is crucial in determining the works he will or will not do among them. He doesn't heal people who have no desire to be healed. He doesn't forgive people who have no desire to be forgiven. He doesn't teach people whose minds are closed. He doesn't bring new life to those who are happy with the old one. And he doesn't save people who have no desire to be saved.

"Blessed are those who are not offended at me," Jesus said on another occasion. Blessed because they know they have a God who identifies Himself so closely with them that He became one of them in the person and work of His Son, Jesus Christ. Blessed are they for they have a God who identifies with them in their failures and in their successes, in the sorrows and in their joys, in their doubts and in their faith, in their fears and in their courage. Blessed are they because such a God can work in them and change them little by little into the very image and likeness of Jesus himself. Blessed are they because they know that this Jesus came not simply to change the circumstances of the world but to change them in the midst of those circumstances.

That's what one man once discovered at a church council meeting. He had met with a group of the council before the scheduled meeting in order to firm up opposition to a program that had been proposed at the last council meeting to advance the mission of the congregation into the community. The council meeting that night was stormy, tempers flared, and, as the saying goes, more heat than light was generated. Finally, that one man who had been at the earlier little meeting spoke up and said, "This isn't Jesus' way, and we are Jesus' people." The meeting adjourned shortly thereafter. No decisions were made. Some were offended by what he said but at least one man discovered that night what it meant to be changed into the likeness of Jesus.

And as that happens in the lives of people like you and me, we find ourselves, sometimes surprisingly, carrying on the work of Jesus – carrying on his works of healing, visiting, teaching, laboring, sharing and loving. And the offense of Jesus becomes ours and all to his glory.

May we never be offended by Jesus. May we be the means by which the offense of others is turned into blessing for all. And may God grant this for Jesus' sake. Amen.